by John Burns

HOTEL DATA MAINTENANCE IN THE GDSs
IS IT STILL AN ISSUE?

No one will argue that displaying accurate availability, rate and description information in the global distribution systems (GDS) – Amadeus, Galileo, Sabre and Worldspan – is essential. If hotels are to receive their optimum flow of reservations from these systems (and from the Internet-based Web sites associated with them), the information must be correct and kept that way at all times.

In the beginning when hotels first became bookable in global distribution systems, all data updates were manually typed into the central reservation system (CRS) and then entered again into each of the then six GDSs. This labor-intensive data entry was done by chain corporate staff or by representation company staff. In the several years following, hoteliers and GDS management cooperated to take a major stride forward. They developed computerized functions to automatically transfer availability changes from hotel CRSs to the GDSs. The next challenge was to automate the processes for rate maintenance in the GDSs, a task much more complex than it might appear.

On the surface a room rate appears as a price. In reality it is associated with considerably more information.   A guestroom rate is the price for a specific number of persons in the room; it is for a specific room type, with specific bedding; it is available between a start date and an end date; it may have restrictions on who may purchase it; and it may have associated business rules such as guarantee and cancellation requirements. In short, creating a new rate in the GDSs is a complex process, just as it is in CRSs. Once a rate is initially created, however, revising the dollar amount of the rate – assuming the other factors associated with that rate remain unchanged – is comparatively simple.

The challenge to hoteliers to maintain up-to-date rates in the GDSs was becoming steadily greater with each passing year. It was not uncommon for the backlog of rate entries waiting to be keyed into the GDSs to be weeks, or in worst cases months. The annual rate solicitation, resulting in hundreds or thousands of new negotiated and corporate rates, was a particular challenge for every hotel company's database group.

Hoteliers sought, and found, several tools to ease this growing rate maintenance burden. The first option to market was offered by Lanyon, Inc. of Irving, Texas. In 1993, Lanyon introduced its Lanyon-RATE, a rate updating product. In succeeding years they created a suite of data maintenance products including RatePublisher (with expanded rate updating features), HODpublisher, DRSpublisher, RFPpublisher, ChannelPublisher and PropertyVault.

Parsippany, N.J.-based WizCom International (now a division of Cendant Corporation's Travel Distribution Services) entered the marketplace with its EasyAccess Rate, also a rate updating program, which was initially limited to its GDS switch service customers. WizCom subsequently supplemented EasyAccess Rate with the addition of EasyAccess HOD and Easy Access RATECREATE. WizCom data maintenance tools were soon after made available to non-WizCom switch users.

Lanyon and WizCom products received a positive reception by the hotel industry and have become the major service-style vendors, with less-visible options also offered by Pegasus Solutions and Tucson, Ariz.-based Airline Automation, Inc. Some hotel companies preferred, however, to purchase a tool rather than use a subscription-style service. The option they found was a technology offered by IBM know as Advanced Communication System Access or ACSA. This product had little promotion and was only loosely adapted for use in hotel industry data updating applications. Early users found that programmer resources were required to understand the basics of this technology before they could themselves write the programs the ACSA hardware/software required in order to perform various rate updating functions. Hotel companies that chose to follow this route included Carlson Hospitality, Omni Hotels and Starwood Hotels & Resorts. Representation company Unirez likewise chose to make the ACSA technology a central ingredient in its GDS updating platform.

As the list of components in the ever-expanding tool suites offered by Lanyon and WizCom suggests, automating the processes for the updating of property descriptions (often termed HODs) and of

chain descriptions (DRSs), as well as those for creation of new room rates, was gaining attention. Update automation capabilities geared for these functions were introduced in the marketplace.   In tandem with development of these maintenance tools, the GDSs enhanced their own updating functions adding new options to ease the hotel challenge of keeping their data current in each GDS.

Cue the Seamless Connectivity

At the same time that automation tools were easing the GDS data maintenance process for the hotel community, a second development was underway. Seamless connectivity, or the upgrading of hotel CRS to GDS links to a new performance level, was taking shape. This raised questions about the need to maintain information in those GDSs.

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Seamless connectivity was introduced in the mid-1990s and was fully embraced by the hotel industry by 2000. Prior to its inception the response to a travel agent's query at their GDS terminal for a list of available rooms and rates at a hotel for a given date was drawn from the GDS's database using information maintained continuously by the hotel chain or representation company.

Seamless connectivity now allowed the GDS to instantly relay that query to the CRS of the chain identified by the travel agent (or Internet shopper using a GDS-related Web site). The CRS then instantly responded with a list of rooms and rates available, accompanied by a two-line sales description.

To Maintain or Not?

The central question then becomes, does seamless connectivity remove the need for hotel companies to maintain availability and rates in the GDSs? It remains an entirely valid question.

The answer to it is simply, yes. Why? Because some of the initial queries that travel agents (and Web sites) make in order to reduce their search to a single chain, or a single property, rely on data stored by hotels in the GDSs – not on seamlessly (or next-generation seamlessly) retrieved data. Without question, many hotel brands and representation companies are reviewing the breadth of rates that today they maintain in the GDSs. And some are reducing the number of rates that they maintain on a moment-to-moment basis in the GDSs. Those companies have realized, however, that real-time maintenance of availability, rates and other data in the GDSs continues to be crucial to successful participation in those systems.

John Burns is president of Hospitality Technology Consulting and welcomes your comments. He can be reached at john@burns-htc.com.

"...Blast it. They must have compared room rates again."